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ABSTRACT
        One of the central issues in the philosophy of
Gabriel Marcel is the distinction between "problem" and "mystery."
The author claims that speech communication scholars find it
necessary to objectify elements of communication in the framework of
a problem in order to find answers in the form of systematic theories
to explain the phenomenon in question. Marcel, however, treats
communication as subjective, which classifies it as a mystery and,
therefore, not open to objective methods of investigation. The author
explains Marcel's analysis of communication as a facet of \man's
participation in existence. She concludes with the question as to
whether the communications scholar inquires out of curiosity about a
problem or, in fact, out of wonder about a mystery. (RN)

Communication--Problem or Mystery?:

An Interpretation of the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel

by

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Communication--Problem or Mystery?:

An Interpretation of the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel

Summary: One of the central issues in the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel is the distinction he makes between the terms "problem" and "mystery." For the speech communication scholar, it is necessary to objectify the elements of communication in the framework of a problem, as he attempts to find answers in the form of systematic theories to explain the phenomenon in question. For Marcel, however, it appears that the nature of communication is essentially subjective, which places it in the realm of mystery, and therefore out of the reach of objective methods of investigation.

In his explication of the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel, Kenneth Gallagher states: "A system is a spectacle which is there for a disengaged mind, a mind which is not itself enclosed within the panorama it beholds. For the human subject such a disengagement is unthinkable."[1]

On this view, the speech scholar engaged in the study of communication theories and systems is engaged either in attempting to think the unthinkable, or to make himself non-human. The disengagement of mind necessary to the description of communication systems and theories is, however, a widely-well-thought-of device for the understanding of communication behavior. We aim at security in thought. We seek a consistent system of propositions, whether the method be deductive or inductive. We search out logical or empirical

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parameters and fill in their interstices with observable
components, in exercises of objectivity. If the nature
of our research were of a sort properly to be thus objecti-
fied, the approach would be above criticism. If, however,
communication is non-objectifiable, then the search for
system is inappropriate.

CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS

Hugh Dalziel Duncan in a recent statement protests the
mechanistic orientation of sociology toward the study of
human communication. His concern is with the function of
symbolic interaction, primarily as the activity of "naming."
This orientation, he states, has been subjected to mechanistic
distortion. What he protests of sociology may be applied as
well to communication theory when he writes: "American
sociologists who think of communication as a 'map,' a
'pattern,' or a 'net,' seem to do so under the illusion
that the use of mechanical models will remove symbols from
'expression,' which is subjective, to some realm of 'process,'
which is objective."[2] Duncan's alternative to the mechanistic
model is the dramatistic model of Kenneth Burke. While this
may be an improvement, in that it treats of communication
as a social, not a physical, event, yet it does not do away
with the rejection of subjectivity to which Gallagher ob-
jected at the beginning of the present paper. The disengage-
ment of mind from an event with which it is necessarily
engaged--as pertains in all forms of communication--results
in a distortion, rather than an explanation, of the
phenomenon under study. If it is Duncan's thesis that

symbolic communication relies for its effectiveness of
the public, rather than the private, nature of the symbols
employed, he, too, has rejected subjective experience as
unreliable in contrast with the reliability of objective
experience; and his system, too, would be viewed by Marcel
as "unthinkable." When Duncan states that for the study
of communication in society, "We must be careful to ground
our methodology in some coherent body of theory,"[3] he
treats communication as a "problem." For Marcel it is a
"mystery."

PROBLEM AND MYSTERY

Marcel describes four major distinctions between problem
and mystery. These distinctions hinge on what he means by
an "object." In the context of the problem, the object is
viewed as something external to the observer, something
encountered as outside and over against the self. Gallagher
explains, "A problem . . . is an inquiry which is set on
foot in respect to an object which the self apprehends in
an exterior way."[4] In a mystery, however, what is given
cannot be detached from the self. Being non-externalizable,
the mysterious is indefinable. "A mystery is a question in
which I am caught up."[5] To question communication is to
question oneself as communicator; no object may be viewed
without consideration of the observer's subjective involve-
ment with it.

First, then, according to Marcel, a "problem" is objecti-
fiable--always with recognition of the necessary distortion
which results--; a mystery is not. Secondly the problem

admits of a solution, has a result; a period may eventually
be put to the inquiry. By contrast, the mystery is in-
soluble--not merely a problem for which the solution has
not yet been found. The question continually renews itself;
there is never a stage reached when further thought is not
always necessary. Thirdly, the objectifiable nature of
the problem makes the experience of it interchangeable among
its viewers; this makes verifiability possible. On the other
hand, the subjective data of mystery involve the necessity
of unverifiability as between viewing or experiencing
subjects. There is no concensus of experience of the data;
therefore, no objectively valid judgment is possible.
Lastly, there is a dramatic difference in the mode in which
the question is asked. Problems are approached in the tenor
of curiosity; the goal is the addition of knowledge to
one's store of experience. Questions pertaining to mystery,
however, are asked in a mood of wonder, according to Marcel,
even of astonishment--as of the delight of the child tasting
a new fruit--even sometimes of joy. There may be wonderment
even in mysteries involving feelings of failure, gloom and
despair.[6]

The concept of mystery as developed by Marcel is central
to his philosophy because it leads directly to the need for
"secondary reflection," that mode of thought which, having
met the mystery, turns in upon itself and examines the
concrete immediacy of experience. The activity of secondary
reflection is not an irrational or non-rational mode of

experience. It is rather a suprarational activity of thought. Marcel states: "I am not a spectator who is looking for a world of structures susceptible of being viewed clearly and distinctly, but rather . . . I listen to the voices and appeals comprising that symphony of Being--which is, for me, in the final analysis, a supra-rational unity beyond images, words, and concepts."[7]

For Marcel, consideration of even the most abstract, outwardly problematic data arises from and finally resolves into consideration of the non-systematic realm of the self, of feeling, and of being. Problem-solving and the construction of systems and models may be a first step toward knowledge. But the final step requires a supra-rational, inward reflection which is ultimately non-systematizable and incommunicable.

It appears, then, impossible or at least inappropriate to derive a theory of communication from the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel. Gallagher states that Marcel himself early recognized that it was futile to set out his philosophy of personal existence in "a system of transmittable theorems, over which the mind feels a comfortable mastery," because "what it would entail is the installation of the mind in the vantage point of the absolute observer, one who had the best possible seat from which to view the totality of the real. In effect, this means a de-personalized observer, a nobody-in-particular, for every personal point of view is

the opposite of absolute: it is _mine_. Personal experience--
my experience inasmuch as it is mine--could therefore
never be integrated into such a system."[8]

THE PHILOSOPHY OF MARCEL

Because, however, we in speech communication are curious,
wish to add to our store of external knowledge some verifiable
constructs, and keep trying to put a period to the inquiry--
are in short, problem-solvers by inclination--, I will
attempt to objectify and define some of the elements of
Marcel's philosophy.

There appears to be no hierarchy of components within
the system. The concepts to be briefly developed here may
be viewed as an interpenetrating matrix, a system of many
dimensions. These divide into three major groups, which I
shall term "worlds," "stages," and "modes."

Marcel makes a distinction between "being" and "having"
and calls them "worlds." There is a pivotal difference
between what one is and what one has. To "have" is to have
the power to give or reveal oneself to another, or to keep
to oneself. This is the basic subject-object relation.
According to H. J. Blackham, Marcel holds that "Possession
of an exterior object involves the 'I' in anxieties. Even
where there is lack of possession, mere desire is a form of
having, and this desire to _enjoy_ possession corresponds to
the anxiety about _losing_ what is possessed."[9]

In the realm of ideas, the tension between the worlds
of being and having is acute, and the "I" must be wary of
whether he _has_ the notion or is _had_ by it. Marcel holds

that this is least true when the person works creatively
with what he "has." The genuine thinker remains creative
because his thought is always being put in question and put
to the test. Both he and his ideas are alive and assimilated
to each other in the mode of mystery.[10]

Thus there appears to emerge a mid-region between these
two worlds: the place of "existence." Out of the tension
between the self and the world there arises, as Blackham
interprets Marcel, "a region in which the self opens itself
to the world and unfolds and is transcended in a participa-
tion which is its subjective reality. The body is the
kernel or the symbol of this middle region when we do not
treat it as an independent reality closed upon itself, but
rather as an outcrop of a submerged kingdom whose main
extent lies below the surface of the water."[11]

This "metaphysical Atlantis," as Blackham calls it, is
the truly inexplorable part of the worlds where we exist;
yet for Marcel it is the region of all that is most deeply
valuable in our experience. It is impossible even provisionally
to explicate and objectify this region; yet it is at the
geographical center of the mystery of communication.

The second dimension of the communication matrix concerns
what I have termed "stages." As labelled by Gallagher, these
stages, or phases in the process of being, are three:
Community, Communication, and Communion. Each involves
different degrees and styles of participation in existence,
and in the worlds of being and having. There is the purely

incarnate, sensuous level; the social level; and the
dyadic, or intersubjective level. In each of these,
as Gallagher puts it, "To be living is to be open to a
reality with which I enter into some sort of commerce. . . .
'Esse est co-esse' [to be is to be with] is true not only
on the plane of sensible existence but above all on the
plane of personal being. . . . The tie which binds me to
others gives me to myself."[12]

The stage of Community is that of the original unity
experienced by the infant with its environment. The presence
of others is an unquestioned, integral part of existence.
It does not occur to the infant to question this pervasive
presence of others, nor to take a position of acceptance
or rejection toward it; it is simply there, part of the
environment.

From this stage, the individual progresses in the normal
course of things to the level of Communication. At this
level, the primarily verbal modes--the public system of
symbols of which Duncan writes--come into operation. Language
as such is primarily dependent on objectification, according
to the theories of Duncan and many others. The interchange-
ability of symbols in a way which makes them meaningful to
many places the use of language in the realm of the problem.
As language isolates and manipulates meaning, it may also
isolate and manipulate its users--those who "have" it. The
paradox of language is that while the goal of its acquisition
is to permit the fullest exchange of meaning, it is itself
the outgrowth of the isolation of the individual.

This separation of self from the community results in
growing awareness of others as separate selves. One makes
of oneself--and of others--an object, a thing. Here is
the realm in which communication as it is generally viewed
is most necessary and most accessible to observation. As
Burke might put it, separation is necessary to the system.[13]
Without it, the communicative situation would not arise.
The awareness of our own and the other's subjectivity
requires the establishment and continued maintenance of
a common world of shared meanings, so that social cooperation
may occur. The stage of Communication is, then, basically
self-centered. From the unconscious co-esse of Community,
one passes into a conscious state of coexisting as a self
with others: to a simultaneity of community and division
which necessitates Communication. Thus the rational use
of public symbols, best observed in the use of language,
is fundamentally egocentric, arising out of a private world,
despite its goal of a common world.

The stage of Communion is reached only as one transcends
what Gallagher terms "the egocentric enticements of communi-
cation" and opens the self to a "thou" in a "truly personal
encounter."[14] The significance of the term "thou" in
existential literature, as in Marcel (who disavows existential-
ism) is its status as a pronoun in the second, rather than
the third, person. Only a "he"--a "thing"--can be character-
ized in terms of his predicates, that is, objectified. In
the stage of Communion, the other is non-objectifiable: he
is a mystery. Gallagher writes: "The thou which is given

to me in an encounter is not a mere repertory for facts; furthermore, he himself is not the subject of a factual description. The reality of the thou cannot be grasped by a series of predicates."[15] According to Marcel, when "Who are you?" is asked of the thou in the spirit of Communion, it is not a request for information; it is a form of the appeal, "Be with me." In Marcel's words, "the path leading from dialectic to love has now been opened."[16]

For Marcel, the experience of Communion--for which his term is "encounter"--is constitutive of the self. To remain in an ego-centered mode of existence is to be only partially alive, is to refuse authenticity. He writes: "All authentic sin will be closing oneself to this universal openness by shutting oneself off from others to take one's own self as center."[17]

The efficient cause of Communion is its mode; and for this mode of openness to the other, Marcel uses the term "disponibilité." According to Gerber, this word connotes welcoming, surrender, abandonment, and allied attitudes which are opposed to the attitude of "crispation" (lit., "turning or curling inward").[18] Blackham further describes this attitude, difficult to translate, as follows: "The theory of the second person (the thou), the presence of two persons to each other . . . implies the notion of disposability. . . the readiness to bestow and spend oneself and make oneself available, and its contrary, indisposability. To be indisposable is to be self-absorbed, that is, to be

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fixed in the realm of having. But I exist in the first
place because I can dispose of what I have, sacrifice it. . . .
In such acts I am not only fully present, I go beyond myself,
I respond . . . I am <u>disponible</u>, hospitable."[19]

The indisponible man, by contrast, is characterized by
his egoism, and by the "inability to admire."[20] Blackham's
words are vivid in regard to what he terms "indisposability;"
it is, he says, "to be restless, gloomy, and anxious by
condition, to be possessed by a vague unquiet which in
relation to particular objects on which interest fixes
hardens into despair, for I tend to identify myself with
what I have and to reflect that when I no longer have any-
thing I shall no longer be anything."[21]

CONCLUSION

My examination of the concepts of Gabriel Marcel has
barely touched the surface of his philosophy. At first
I was tempted to treat superficially some of these concepts,
to make easy translations of such terms as "encounter,"
"openness," and even "existence," as they have been loosely
and analogically used in some theories of communication. I
soon learned that this approach is in error. The more I
read of Marcel, the more I was aware of an inner resistance
to the idea of trying to view his philosophy of interpersonal
relations in terms of "system." His treatment of the
distinction between problem and mystery settled for me the
inappropriateness of such a method. Yet I was aware also
of my own ingrained need for system. The attempts of Duncan

and Burke to ground a theory of symbolic interaction in the
public symbols with which we normally communicate had
begun to meet this need in a way which the mechanistic
models of communication had never done for me. Yet Marcel
made even these seem superficial modes of "problem-solving;"
and it seems what we have here is a mystery. Pursued to
its limits, there is no way to objectify the essence of the
self-other relation in communication.

According to Marcel, the nexus of this series of acts
we commonly call communication is located in "the act by
which I expose myself to the other person instead of
protecting myself from him, which makes him penetrable
for me at the same time as I become penetrable for him."[22]
But the act itself is necessarily obscure. Marcel writes:
"Yourself, himself. . . . Where does a personality begin?
What is revealed. . . is that there is a region of fructifying
obscurity transcending the closed systems in which thought
imprisons us, where beings may communicate, where they are
in and by the very act of communication."[23]

Will we ask our questions, then, out of curiosity about
the problem, or of wonder about the mystery? Attempts to
theorize beyond the pragmatic needs of problem-solving are,
on this view, an attempt to "think the unthinkable," and
may cause us to lose our humanity. One must proceed with
caution, aware of the risks involved. The systems we reify
in theory may come to be the ideas which "have' us, rather
than the materials from which we may further create our being
and experience our existence.

[Footnotes]

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[1] The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel (New York, 1962), p. 13.

[2] Symbols in Society (New York, 1968), p. 5.

[3] Duncan, p. 16.

[4] Gallagher, p. 31.

[5] Gallagher, p. 32.

[6] The foregoing paragraph abstracted from Gallagher, pp. 31-40.

[7] The Existential Background of Human Dignity (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), pp. 82-83.

[8] Gallagher, p. 13.

[9] Six Existentialist Thinkers (New York, 1959), p. 71.

[10] See Blackham, pp. 71-72.

[11] Blackham, p. 72.

[12] Gallagher, p. 22.

[13] See William H. Rueckert, Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations (Minneapolis, 1963), passim.

[14] Gallagher, p. 23.

[15] Gallagher, p. 25.

[16] Creative Fidelity (New York, 1964), p. 33.

[17] See Rudolph Gerber, "Marcel and the Being of the 'Other'," Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry, VI (Fall, 1966), 86.

[18]Gerber, p. 188.

[19]Blackham, pp. 80-81.

[20]Gallagher, p. 26.

[21]Blackham, p. 80.

[22]Creative Fidelity, p. 36.

[23]Creative Fidelity, p. 35.